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Near East and South Asia Review

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12 February 1988

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**Near East and
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*Page***Article****The 25th Infantry Division: An Overview of a "Typical"
Afghan Division**

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Near East and
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Article

The 25th Infantry Division:
An Overview of a "Typical"
Afghan Division

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The Afghan army's 25th Infantry Division has long been regarded as one of the Kabul regime's most important units.

The leaders of the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)—many of whom have their homes in the area of Paktia Province where the 25th operates—pay particular attention to the performance and needs of the unit. The 25th's location near several key insurgent infiltration routes and its frequent involvement in combat make it an excellent indicator of the strengths and weaknesses of the Afghan army as a whole.

Despite the attention lavished by the regime on the 25th Division, we believe this unit, like most of the Afghan army, has several crippling deficiencies—manpower shortages, equipment problems, and low morale—which prevent it from playing a major role in the counterinsurgency without Soviet support. Moreover, these problems make it unlikely that the 25th, or the Afghan army as a whole, could stand on its own against the insurgents following a Soviet withdrawal.

Background

The 25th Infantry Division is headquartered in an old hilltop fortress in the city of Khowst in Paktia Province. We believe its operational area stretches from a crescent-shaped mountain range along the eastern Afghanistan border near Jaji Maydan in northern Paktia south to Zhawar Killi in central Paktia.

Divisional elements undertake frequent sweep operations to the north, east, and south of Khowst to quell insurgent activity.

The division headquarters and the subordinate units deployed in the region frequently come under insurgent attack.

The introduction of improved insurgent surface-to-air missile capabilities has made aerial resupply difficult, forcing most flights to use the cover of darkness. According to US Embassy reporting, Khowst was under siege for at least a month before the Soviet and

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All for the Fatherland!

Personnel attached to the division perform several duties in the region ranging from distribution of foodstuffs and fuel to conducting sweep operations against insurgent strongholds and pacification of the population. The division attempts to maintain a close relationship with the local populace by holding local meetings and consulting religious authorities in the region, [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Tribal groups, including some Hazaras, fight with the divisional units, although most of the division consists of local conscripts. [redacted]

[redacted]

Members of the PDPA are also active in the division. The division rewards and stresses party work,

[redacted]

Prelude to Combat

Accounts of 25th Division operations detail how it combats the insurgency in the Khowst area.

[redacted] operations usually begin with a planning session at 25th Division headquarters in which the commander of the division, his deputies, and a senior Soviet adviser participate. The adviser approves the operational plan and probably relays it to authorities in Kabul for further approval. The plans usually detail an objective and include deployments, units from the division that will be involved, and support elements that are necessary to conduct the operation. In many cases, III Corps infantry units and often Afghan units from outside the province are flown into Khowst to augment divisional assets. Soviet air support, usually from Gardeyz, is coordinated before the initial deployment of forces, and, if the situation warrants and when possible, additional aircraft are brought in and stage from Khowst airfield. [redacted]

Afghan offensive and resupply operation in December and January that effectively relieved the siege. During the same period, heavy insurgent rocket attacks sometimes prevented resupply aircraft from landing at the airfield, and supplies had to be dropped into Khowst by parachute. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

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Command and Control

Most major offensive combat operations conducted by the division near Khowst usually last 15 to 20 days. We believe the division has major problems in conducting such operations on its own primarily because of poor command and control. It has particular problems with communications that, in our view, limit the operational effectiveness of subordinate units from the inception of combat operations. [redacted] in late 1987 the Afghan army was experiencing a shortfall of 50 percent in short-range/low-power radio sets and a 75-percent deficiency in high-power radios, hampering communications for the division and for combat operations. [redacted]

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Personnel shortages and equipment and ammunition deficiencies also create problems for the division during operations. Prolonged operations can wreak havoc on the division's ability to control and defend subordinate units, in our view. [redacted]

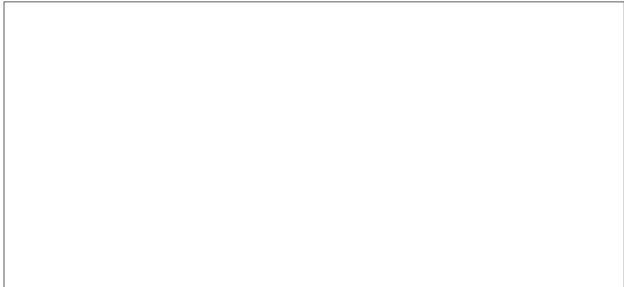
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Desertions hinder the division's combat capabilities and are of a continuing concern of the division commander, [redacted]

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The objectives of many operations are never stated, though we believe that they are intended to protect the support network and outposts in the plain. The majority of the operations are often initiated to relieve insurgent pressure on certain areas, and most operations groups maintain an offensive posture. Units have been noted advancing and attacking insurgent positions in a coordinated fashion [redacted]

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Equipment shortages have also affected the division's operations and have limited its effectiveness. [redacted]

Nearly all operations are directed toward the Pakistani border areas. [redacted]

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Not a Rosy Picture

In addition to command and control deficiencies, we believe the division suffers from problems that plague most divisions in the Afghan army. Like the army as a whole, the 25th's major problem is its inability to recruit and maintain sufficient manpower. Examination of the 25th's strength since late 1979 indicates the extent of the division's problems. Manpower in the division has fallen steadily from the time of the Soviet invasion, when the division was close to authorized strength, to below 1,000 men at present. [redacted]

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Mutinies. [redacted] in late January 1983, 300 armed Afghan soldiers attached to the 25th Division's 23rd Infantry Regiment mutinied. Officers and enlisted men killed six of the division's Soviet advisers and an unknown number of Afghan Communist officers. [redacted]

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The 25th in Action

We believe most operations undertaken by the 25th Division are either sweeps looking for insurgent strongholds or efforts to relieve outposts besieged by the guerrillas. The 25th Infantry Division usually conducts sweep operations only within the Khowst plain. In most operations the headquarters and command element of the division, probably located at division headquarters, provides overall operational support while the deployed operations group positions and guides the combat units to their assigned objective. The division commander and Soviet advisers are present at various times at both the division headquarters and at the field command post (operations group headquarters) where they coordinate all aspects of the operation including the movements of infantry units and the targets for artillery firings and air support. [redacted]

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Outlook

The problems faced by the 25th Infantry Division are found throughout the Afghan army and are not likely to improve in the near term. Without sufficient manpower or backing by Soviet troops, the division—and the army as a whole—fails to be a decisive force. Desertions will continue, and equipment holdings will remain poor despite Soviet resupply efforts.

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This division has been able to operate with insufficient equipment and manpower for at least nine years with its main supply route via the Gardeyz-Khowst road cut by insurgent forces. Last month a combined

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Soviet and regime combat operation forced open the road to resupply Khowst. The recent withdrawal of combat forces from the road has once again left the road in jeopardy, and, unless the Afghan army effectively garrisons the road from Gardeyz, the division will not be able to rely on convoy support and will once again have to turn to aerial resupply. [REDACTED]

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Its relative seclusion and future dependence on support from Kabul place the division in a precarious position if the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. In our view, without adequate support, weaponry, or manpower the division will continue to disintegrate, and Khowst would almost certainly fall into insurgent hands. [REDACTED]

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